



THE OFFICE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Date: October 10, 2018
To: Daphné J. M. Robinson
From: Alexander B. Roberson
Page Length: 9
RE: Gateway University Allegations

MEMORANDUM

I. INTRODUCTION AND INVESTIGATORY SUMMARY

In June 2018, a former employee of Gateway University School of Applied Sciences, ALLEGING PARTY, contacted and met with Shelby County Schools' Director of Charter Schools, Daphné J. M. Robinson, to make the following allegations concerning Gateway University, an SCS Charter-Managed School that opened in the 2017-2018 school year:

- ALLEGATION #1. There was a non-functioning, "fictitious" board that did not hold legitimate meetings during the 2017-2018 school year.
- ALLEGATION #2. Grades were changed in English and Geometry courses.
- ALLEGATION #3. Grades were awarded in two classes – Academic Seminar and Geometry – in which students did not receive instruction.
- ALLEGATION #4. Gateway University relied on uncertified teachers, particularly in English and World History & Geography.
- ALLEGATION #5. Students were improperly used as custodial staff.
- ALLEGATION #6. An employee did not clear a background check, but was nevertheless employed by Gateway University.

Following Director Robinson's meeting with ALLEGING PARTY, the Office of Charter Schools ("The Office") concluded that it was necessary to conduct a *preliminary* investigation in order to determine if there was a sufficient basis to begin a full investigation into the matter.

Based on the results of the preliminary investigation, there appeared to be some evidence to substantiate three of the allegations concerning Gateway University, insufficient proof to substantiate two allegations, and one allegation that produced inconclusive evidence.¹

¹ The Office also received and reviewed counter allegations from Gateway University concerning ALLEGING PARTY. However, because the counter allegations are outside the scope of this review, an analysis of the allegations have been excluded from this report.

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Based on the outcome of the preliminary investigation, The Office began a full investigation into the allegations. The results of the full investigation are provided below.

II. INVESTIGATORY METHODOLOGY

To facilitate a full investigation into the allegations, The Office interviewed and/or communicated with the following Gateway University employees and representatives, and other entities:

- ALLEGING PARTY;
- Dr. Soseprialade, Founder and CEO of Gateway University;²
- Ben Fox, Adams and Reese, LLP;
- Rev. Anthony Anderson, Gateway University advisor;
- Sheleah Harris, Tennessee Charter Schools Center;
- A Gateway University vendor;
- Three (3) individuals who were employed at Gateway University during the 2017-2018 school year but separated from the school before the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year;
- Four (4) individuals who were employed at Gateway University during the 2017-2018 school year and remained employed at the school at the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year;
- Employees of Shelby County Schools (“SCS”); and
- Bartlett Police Department.

The Office also requested and/or reviewed various item and documents, which included, but were not limited to, Gateway University’s contract and charter school agreement, charter school board roster, meeting minutes and other documents, course syllabi, class rosters, staff lists, results of background checks, relevant education records, relevant correspondence and email communications from, to, between or about Gateway University employees and representatives regarding the allegations, personnel files, information obtained through PowerSchool, grade books, police reports from the Bartlett Police Department, and teacher rosters.

III. FACTS

GOVERNING BOARD

Gateway University’s contract and charter agreement states that the school’s governing board (“Governing Board”) will be no less than five (5) members and no more than fifteen (15) members. However, the board roster provided by Gateway University listed Anthony Brown, Trevia Chatman, Dr. Soseprialade, and Colby Mitchell as active board members at the close of the 2017-2018 school year. Several former board members further indicated they left the board meetings before the meeting minutes began or that they accurately reflected the meetings they attended when they served on the Gateway Governing Board. The minutes provided by Gateway University suggest that Board Chair Anthony Brown only attended one meeting, on September 28, 2017. The minutes indicate that from the December 28, 2017 board meeting until the end of the academic year, meetings of the Governing

² Dr. Dede indicated on, at least, one phone conference, Gateway University Board member Shaprese Sims was present on the call.

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Board were attended only by Chatman, Dr. Dede, and Mitchell. Current board member Colby Mitchell affirmed the validity of the meeting minutes.

GRADE CHANGES

Former employees who were interviewed stated there was no documentation for English as a Second Language (ESL) students or Special Education students, and that, consequently, no students were given failing grades.

- *English I Course*

All grades stored in PowerSchool were pulled from the teacher grade book. If a change occurred, it would appear that such a change occurred at the teacher grade book level, not after the grades were entered and stored in PowerSchool. Changes in the grade book can only be made by staff assigned to the class, and those changes are not available through an audit. Teachers stated that grades were entered into PowerSchool with fidelity, but that there was a grade floor in place.

- *Geometry*

The Office contacted Student Information Management to obtain the gradebook for the Teacher of Record for Geometry from PowerSchool. This gradebook matched the gradebook provided by Gateway University. However, every student earned the exact same grade for every assignment every quarter and each received the same final grade, a 92%. Dr. Dede stated, and PowerSchool reflects, that there were two cohorts of Geometry students. One took Geometry Period 2A and one Period 6A.

Dr. Dede stated the class was conducted as a hybrid on-line/in person class. He states that Gateway attempted to utilize Shelby County Schools Virtual School but found it to be unsatisfactory for their needs. Instead, Gateway University utilized Glencoe and Kahn. Dr. Dede states that he was the math teacher in the morning, when he met with students for a period of fifteen minutes, during which time Geometry students were allowed to ask questions. The two Geometry cohorts would meet with Dr. Dede in the morning together.

The Office contacted Virtual Schools and obtained the usage log for students enrolled in Online Geometry. Only four of seven students had a usage log; the other three students never logged onto Virtual Schools while enrolled.

- *World History & Geography*

The World History & Geography teacher from September 2017 to the end of the academic year alleged that both Dr. Dede and ALLEGING PARTY asked her to change grades. She stated that she was told “intellectually disabled” students were not allowed to fail. She stated that at the end of the first quarter, nearly every student had received a grade of “F”. She stated that Dr. Dede called her and made her change the grade on all assignments to a minimum score of 50, so that more students would pass.

The World History & Geography teacher stated that “anyone” could change grades at any time, and that there was no security for PowerSchool passwords. She stated that she routinely was instructed to enter grades using the credentials for the Teachers of Record listed as the teachers of record for World History & Geography.

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GRADES EARNED IN CLASSES WITHOUT INSTRUCTION

- *Academic Seminar*

The Office obtained the grade books for Academic Seminar, which is presented in PowerSchool as a graded, for-credit class. One former employee described it as a “study hall.” She stated that staff told Gateway University students that Academic Seminar was graded but that it was not truly graded. She stated she never entered any grades for Academic Seminar. She stated that when she first arrived at Gateway University in October 2017, the course work for Academic Seminar was being designed by Dr. Dede, and later it was designed by another teacher, but that eventually no one designed course work for Academic Seminar and that it was left up to the teachers. She stated that during Academic Seminar, Dr. Dede would pull favorite students from the class and play football, basketball, or let them run track in the parking lot in front of the school. She suggested that seeing other students released from Academic Seminar allowed students to deduce that the class was not truly graded.

Another former employee stated that Academic Seminar made him uncomfortable. He stated that if Academic Seminar was graded, it was a pass/fail class. He stated that the class was originally intended to be a behavioral health and academic success class, but that there was no curriculum support. He stated that eventually Dr. Dede would hand out curriculum weekly, and that work was collected from students, but never graded. He stated that he reported which students completed the work to Dr. Dede, but there was no weekly grading.

A current employee described Academic Seminar as a “homeroom,” during which she had her students watch CNN-10, discuss current events, and write a response to her prompt. She stated that when she arrived in February 2018, there was no curriculum for Academic Seminar and that students told her that they “never did anything during that period.” She stated that Academic Seminar was not a graded class and that she was never given instruction on how to administer the class during the academic year.

Another current employee stated that she entered grades for Academic Seminar, but that the grades were participation grades. She stated that in her Academic Seminar, students would watch videos and discuss what they had seen. She stated that sometimes she was given course work, but not every week.

Dr. Dede stated that Academic Seminar was a hybrid class, which relied on Habitues, Career 21, and Avid to supply curriculum and coursework. He stated that students in Academic Seminar received something similar to a completion grade.

- *Geometry*

The Office also obtained the grade books for Geometry, as well as the usage log for Online Geometry from Virtual Schools. Only four of seven students had a usage log; the other three students never logged onto Virtual Schools while enrolled. The founding math teacher at Gateway stated that, after the first month of school, the Geometry students would be removed from his Algebra class, and that he did not teach Geometry. He stated that the students would be given a basic geometry overview and that he would provide informal instruction in his free time, but that students were expected to work independently and without instruction. He stated that the students were eventually enrolled in Geometry in PowerSchool and provided with laptops, but that Dede refused to hire a second math teacher for Geometry.

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Every former staff member at Gateway University described the Geometry course the same way. One former employee stated that the Geometry students were sent out of the Algebra classroom to sit in a “nook”, where the students were given work to do. She stated that occasionally the students would ask her for help, but she was unable to assist. She stated that there was never a Geometry teacher.

A current employee stated that the math teacher would always send a group of children to the common area, where they did independent work, though occasionally Dede would accompany them. She stated that she “couldn’t say [she] ever saw a geometry class being taught.”

Another current employee stated that the Geometry class occurred across the hall from her classroom in the teacher’s lounge. She stated that sometimes Dede taught the class, and that sometimes no one taught the class.

The Office contacted Student Information Management to obtain the gradebook for the Teacher of Record for Geometry from PowerSchool. This gradebook matched the gradebook provided by Gateway University. However, every student earned the exact same grade for every assignment every quarter and each received the same final grade, a 92%.

The Teacher of Record for Geometry is listed in PowerSchool as the Teacher of Record, and the information provided by Gateway states the same. The Teacher of Record’s schedule, as listed in PowerSchool, is as follows:

Period	Room	Class
2A	101	Algebra I
2A	101	Geometry
3A	101	Algebra I
4A	101	Algebra I
5A	100	World History
6A	101	Algebra I
6A	100	World History
6A	101	Geometry

Of note is that when the Teacher of Records was listed as teaching Geometry in Period 2, she was also teaching Algebra I. When she was teaching Geometry in Period 6, she was also teaching World History & Geography and Algebra I.

The state End of Course assessments for Geometry show that all seven students who took the EOC scored in the “Below: level.

Dr. Dede stated that the Teacher of Record never taught Geometry, and that the students taught themselves using Glencoe and Kahn. Dr. Dede stated that the students would meet with Dr. Dede in the morning for fifteen minutes to discuss geometry but otherwise received no direct instruction from Gateway University staff. Dr. Dede stated that if a student had a question during his or her Period 2A or Period 6A Geometry class, he or she would have to ask either Dr. Dede or the Teacher of Record, but that such an instance was a rare occurrence. Dr. Dede stated that he did not include the End of Course assessment grades in the documentation provided to the Office, but because students worked collaboratively during the year, they all had the same grades.

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UNLICENSED TEACHERS

Dr. Dede admitted in a press release to *Chalkbeat* that Gateway University used long-term substitutes, stating that “[w]hen necessary, we have brought in talented short-term and long-term substitute teachers (certified and uncertified) to support our school program.” The Gateway Governing Board minutes reflect that at every monthly meeting held between September 28, 2017, through the end of the school year, Gateway University had at least one vacancy, for which “experienced substitutes [had] been supporting.”

The Office used the Tennessee teacher licensure portal to confirm the licensure information for the following staff members:

EMPLOYEE 1 is licensed in English 6-12, expiration date 8/31/2020.
EMPLOYEE 2 is licensed in Biology 6-12, expiration date 8/31/2018.
EMPLOYEE 3 appears to be unlicensed.
EMPLOYEE 4 is licensed in Mathematics 7-12, expiration date 8/31/2019.
EMPLOYEE 5 is licensed in Sped Comp K-12, expiration date 8/31/2020.
EMPLOYEE 6 is licensed in Mathematics 7-12, expiration date 8/31/2025.
EMPLOYEE 10 had a permit license for Sped Modified K-12, expiration date 8/31/2017.
EMPLOYEE 11 appears to be unlicensed.

The Office spoke with SCS’s Human Resources Department, which confirmed that no waivers were issued for teachers at Gateway University to teach outside their license.

Three current or former employees stated that at some point during the year, they witnessed Dr. Dede teach English, Geometry, or World History & Geography. According to a public search of teacher licenses, Dr. Dede appears to be unlicensed.

- *English*

EMPLOYEE 5 is listed as the Teacher of Record for English, but she is not licensed in English. The long-term substitute, EMPLOYEE 10, is not licensed. EMPLOYEE 10 confirmed that she taught English at Gateway University from the last week of February or the first week of March 2018 until the end of the academic year on May 24, 2018. The staff list provided by Gateway University confirms that EMPLOYEE 10 served as a long-term substitute teacher from March 12, 2018 to May 24, 2018.

- *World History & Geography*

EMPLOYEE 2 and EMPLOYEE 4 are listed as the Teachers of Record in World History & Geography, but neither is licensed in Social Studies.

ALLEGING PARTY provided screen shots of text messages purported to be from Dr. Dede to ALLEGING PARTY indicating, among other things, that EMPLOYEE 11 was an unlicensed long-term substitute. EMPLOYEE 11 stated that she was the only World History & Geography teacher from early September 2017 until the end of the academic year.

Dr. Dede stated that World History & Geography was a hybrid program, overseen by EMPLOYEE 11, who served in an academic support role. ALLEGING PARTY and four current or former staff members believe that EMPLOYEE 11 was functionally the World History & Geography teacher. Documentation provided by EMPLOYEE 11 suggests that she was submitting lesson plans and course work for World History & Geography to Dr. Dede.

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STUDENTS IMPROPERLY USED AS CUSTODIAL STAFF

The Office contacted Gateway University custodial services vendor to discuss the frequency with which the vendor provided services to the school. The vendor stated that they only cleaned the facility a total of six times during the 2017-2018 academic year. The vendor further stated, among other things, that Dr. Dede told the vendor on at least one occasion, the school's track & field team was made to clean the facility. The vendor estimated this occurred two weeks before the winter break.

In a press release to *Chalkbeat*, Dr. Dede confirmed that students were sometimes asked to assist in maintaining the facility, stating, "Gateway University's state-of-the-art facility is maintained by building engineering experts and janitorial service providers to ensure the cleanliness of our school building. It's also not uncommon for our students to assist in cleaning their classrooms, along with their teachers. We are a small, tight-knit school, and this affords us the opportunity to do things in a unique yet efficient way."

All former staff interviewed stated that students were asked to clean the cafeteria and classrooms, to take out the garbage, vacuum, or mop. No one reported that a student was ever coerced or forced to clean the facility, and no one reported that students did any more demanding labor than light housekeeping duties. No one reported that a student ever cleaned the bathrooms. No current or former faculty member at Gateway University stated they saw students perform duties customarily assigned to a custodian or that students were ever asked to do more than clean up after themselves in the cafeteria or classroom.

Dr. Dede stated students who were asked to assist in maintaining the cleanliness of the cafeteria were explicitly not allowed to use such duty as an excuse to miss class. However, a current teacher stated that some students would be pulled from class to clean, which would prompt her to email Dr. Dede and remind him that the students were better served in class. Subsequently, the student would return to the classroom. She stated that students would occasionally miss fifteen (15) minutes of her eighty (80) minute class when asked to stay behind and assist in cleaning the cafeteria. Additionally, another current teacher stated that students would be asked to help clean the facility after they had been removed from the classroom environment for disruptive behavior.

EMPLOYEE HIRED BEFORE RECEIVING SAFETY & SECURITY CLEARANCE

The Office reached out to SCS's Department of Safety & Security, which provided us with a letter dated October 19, 2017 to Dr. Dede, informing him that EMPLOYEE 1 had not been cleared and that additional information was required before determination could be made. No additional information was received by the Safety & Security.

Information Technology provided The Office with the active directory account information for EMPLOYEE 1, indicating that her active directory account was created on November 1, 2017 and disabled on February 15, 2018. Dr. Dede stated that there was nothing to indicate that EMPLOYEE 1 was precluded from working on the October 19, 2017 letter. In response to our request for evidence of a cleared background check for EMPLOYEE 1, Dr. Dede provided us with a copy of the above-referenced letter, but did not provide any additional documentation showing that EMPLOYEE 1 had eventually obtained final security clearance. The employee began employment with Gateway University on October 22, 2017.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the interviews with the above-mentioned individuals, a review of documents and items provided by these individuals and others, we made the following conclusions with respect to each allegation:

ALLEGATION #1 – “FICTITIOUS” GOVERNING BOARD

The Gateway University governing board functionally consisted of three (3) members, including the founder and CEO of Gateway University, and held regular meetings. However, according to board meeting minutes, Gateway University Board Chair Anthony Brown did not attend any meetings after September 28, 2017. The governing board roster, as Gateway University contends it was constituted, was one member less than the minimum number agreed to in the charter agreement.

Therefore, there appears to be some evidence that substantiates, at least in part, Allegation #1.

ALLEGATION #2 - GRADE CHANGES IN ENGLISH AND GEOMETRY CLASSES

There is some indication of operational troubles and confusion concerning the reporting of grades. Long-term substitutes were given the credentials of other staff members for the purpose of inputting grades. Teachers spoke of grade floors and pressure from the administration to not fail students. Several teachers indicated that students with intellectual disabilities or English language learners were not properly identified, and to avoid giving an ESL or Special Education student a failing grade, no student was to be given a failing grade. While some teachers allege, and text messages from Dr. Dede to ALLEGING PARTY support, the assertion that grades were changed in Computer Science, English, or Math, there is no clear indication that the grade changes were impermissible or anything more nefarious than a grade floor. Ultimately, some students did fail some classes.³

Based on these facts, it appears that Allegation #2 is neither substantiated nor unsubstantiated, but merits concern, particularly as it relates to ESL and Special Education students.

ALLEGATION #3 - GRADES EARNED IN CLASSES WITHOUT INSTRUCTION

Academic Seminar appears to have been an unstructured study hall. Staff did not mention any of the assignments, journals, or projects described in the Academic Seminar syllabus provided by Gateway University. Student grades provided by Gateway University show variation from assignment to assignment and student to student in the Quarter 1 grades, but by Quarter 4, almost all students receive the same grades across all assignments.

The Geometry course was never taught in any capacity that would resemble actual instruction. All staff members stated that there was never a Geometry teacher. The original math teacher stated that the students would be removed from his class to teach themselves geometry. Dede stated that students would meet with him in the morning and utilize his experience as a former math teacher. The Virtual Schools class in which students were enrolled was only temporarily and partially utilized. There is no indication that students were ever enrolled in an on-line class with an instructor, and several staff members stated the students would ask for help but never received competent or qualified math instruction.

³ Grades in Academic Seminar and Geometry are discussed below.

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The Geometry students all earned the same grade on every assignment and the same grade overall, a 92%. Dede stated that this was because students worked collaboratively. However, the cohorts were separated into a cohort of three and a cohort of four. That the students would earn the same grades across cohorts is unlikely. Ultimately, all students earned a Below level on their state Geometry End of Course assessments. These students were presumably some of the school's more advanced mathematics students having successfully completed Algebra I during eighth grade.

The evidence appears to substantiate the allegation that students did not receive instruction from a full-time Geometry teacher, and that the quality of the curriculum and classroom time dedicated to the instruction is questionable.

ALLEGATION #4 - UNLICENSED TEACHERS

There appears to be some evidence that substantiates Allegation #4. The teachers for World History & Geography and English were two unlicensed long-term substitute teachers. The Teachers of Record for World History & Geography and English were unlicensed in those subject areas. The staff list provided by Gateway University confirms the employment of the long-term substitutes alleged to have taught the two above referenced classes.

ALLEGATION #5 - STUDENTS IMPROPERLY USED AS CUSTODIAL STAFF

No former staff member stated they ever saw a student perform custodial duties more demanding than cleaning the cafeteria or vacuuming the carpeted classrooms at the end of the day. Therefore, there does not appear to be any evidence to substantiate Allegation #5.

ALLEGATION #6 - EMPLOYEE HIRED BEFORE RECEIVING SAFETY & SECURITY CLEARANCE

The employee in question was never cleared by Safety & Security for employment, but she was never expressly precluded from employment either. Gateway University received a notice on Thursday, October 19, 2017, stating that more information was required before Safety & Security could make a determination. The employee began working at Gateway University on Saturday, October 22, 2017. Therefore, there appears to be some evidence that substantiates Allegation #6.